

Principled women, pressured men: nostalgia in Fljótsdoela saga

Article

Published Version

Sayers, W. (1996) Principled women, pressured men:
nostalgia in Fljótsdoela saga. Reading Medieval Studies, XXII.
pp. 21-62. ISSN 0950-3129 Available at
<https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/84738/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

Principled Women, Pressured Men: Nostalgia in *Fljótsdæla saga*

William Sayers
University of Maryland

Fljótsdæla saga has been called the last of the family sagas, and is dated to the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century.¹ Internally, it has the anachronistic fiction of the farmer Hreiðarr sitting up late at night in his bed-closet to read a saga; as exceptional coda, it gives the name and descent of the author, Þorvaldr Ingjaldsson; in time, its composition coincides with the introduction of paper to Iceland, leading to the paper copies of this saga and of other older vellum manuscripts, that next stage in preservation to which we owe so much. The saga purports to be a continuation of *Hrafnkels saga* in terms of sites and characters, if not in theme and ethical problematics. Its author was well read in the traditional literature of his area of Iceland. Although he can hardly have been conscious of writing what a later age might call the final chapter of the family saga as genre, it is of interest to pose such questions as the relationship of *Fljótsdæla saga* to 'classical' sagas of the Icelanders, to its immediate antecedents in *Hrafnkels saga* and *Droplaugarsona saga*, and to other genres such as the legendary romances, whose conventional ranking subordinate to the family sagas on the aesthetic scale has contributed to the unwarranted assumption that their vogue post-dates the period of family saga composition.²

In such an exercise in the relative positioning of *Fljótsdæla saga* one might look for preferential themes but, to anticipate the later analysis, a more rewarding initial approach to this work will be to consider the dominant personality types and situations in which they become involved. This concern for character type and performance space is reflected in one part of my wry title, my conclusions as to authorial stance in the other. In the following the cast of female players will be reviewed first, then the males, whose palette of social accountability and agency is a rather different one, with a view to a better understanding of respective gender roles. Such comparisons are assisted by laying over the episodes of the saga a mental grid that permits localization and specification of women and men according to criteria of original social

status, specific social and economic condition at the time of the saga, plot-related situation in which the character is called to act (or defer action), the stage where this action is realized and its modality, the results positive and negative, finally, the consequent stance taken by the community within the story and by the author before his public. The portrait gallery and the measure of its selective traditionalism will assist in determining one author's 'late medieval' view of the national past and its literary heritage.

*

Fljótsdæla saga opens with a capsule portrait that could be found in any of a dozen sagas, although as introductory statement it is less common than information on ancestral figures from the settler generation. With typical saga economy, we are, if not *in medias res*, on the brink:

Þorgerðr hét kona. Hun bjó í Fljótsdal austr. Hun var ekkja af hinum beztum ættum ok hafði þá fé lítit. Þar bjó hun, sem nú heitir á Þorgerdarstöðum.

[There was a woman called Thordgerd who lived in the east, in Fljotsdale; she was a widow and though of very good family, she was short of money at that time. She lived at the place now called Thorgerdarstead.³]

One of the recurring tensions the saga will explore is that between well born status, straitened economic circumstances, and available means to reconcile the two. For a woman these were largely limited to marriage.⁴ Typical for the correlative male situation was the inverse imbalance: modest family origins but relative wealth, ambition to 'marry up' rather than need. In this opening and an immediately following marriage episode *Fljótsdæla saga* is true to classic form in the initial relief accorded an important and recurrent theme. As will be seen, the detail of a farm name based on a female owner is also significant.

The first extended woman's portrait comes some chapters later, after various families in Fljótsdal have been introduced, and inter- and intra-familial ties and strains established. This occurs in the context of a voyage by Þorvaldr Þiðrandason, one of the Njarðvíkings, when he is shipwrecked on Shetland. The deeds of Icelanders abroad are frequently cast in the 'adventure mode' that is conventionally associated with the

fornaldarsögur or mytho-heroic romances, in that feuds and socio-economic circumstances characteristic of the family saga are downplayed as the hero overcomes various supernatural obstacles to win a prize, fortune or wife. Þorvaldr's accomplishment is to rescue the daughter of the (non-historical) Earl of Shetland who has been held captive by a giant. In this romance setting she displays the usual maidenly concern for, and fidelity to, the perhaps over-bold hero, but once married and an immigrant to Iceland she rapidly 'acculturates' to the ethos of the family saga, acting within the value system exemplified in this corpus. This is Droplaug, whose sons lent their name to the thirteenth-century *Droplaugarsona saga*, the direct antecedent, in terms of content, of *Fljótsdæla saga*. Þorvaldr recognized the difference in station between the earl's daughter and himself and for that reason declined succession to the earldom, in this recalling Óláfr pái's refusal of a more legitimate succession to an Irish throne (*Laxdæla saga*). Earlier, Þorvaldr had not pushed for his share of his father's chieftainship in Iceland, leaving it to his brother Ketill, but he is successful in marriage in the adventure abroad. His son Helgi will attempt to implement the acquisitive mode of adventure in Iceland, a setting where it is inappropriate. Droplaug marries down in term of absolute rank, but up in the chauvinistic sense that she marries an Icelander and prefers residence in Iceland over the earl's court in Shetland. She is characterized as follows:

Vóru góðar þeira samfarir, því at hvórt þeirra veitti öðru vel, en við aðra menn var hun heldr skapstór, en þess í milli fálát ok steigurlát, en þó var hun afbragð annarra kvenna, bæði at yfirlitum ok atgjörvi. (232)

[She excelled other women in both appearance and ability and though rather haughty, reserved and arrogant with others, she and Thorvald got on well together because they cared for each other. (15)]

The moral qualities denoted by adjectival descriptors of female personality will be considered below. Droplaug is accompanied by her mother Arneiðr, who first bequeaths her land to her sons and marries off another daughter, Gróa. Droplaug has her mother take over the indoor management of the farmhouse in Iceland and, indeed, is explicitly said

not to have concerned herself with such matters: 'Var hun ríkilát mjök. Pótti mönnum mikils um hana vert' (233) ['she was a proud woman and people thought highly of her' (17)]. This may well be an instance of story lining up with pre-existent placename, since the property bore the name *Arneiðarstaðir*; again, the farm unit, the hub of Icelandic life, has a feminine marker. Droplaug gives birth to two sons, Helgi and Grímr. The former, the elder, is the dominant initiative-taker, but the younger brother will display the persistence that often characterizes the more withdrawn member of such a pair. On the death of her mother Droplaug assumes management of the household.

Some time later when Þorvaldr and Droplaug are invited to a marriage feast, she declines and attempts to dissuade her husband from attending as a consequence of a premonition that they have nothing to gain by it. Familiar with the saga genre's repertory of portents, dreams, prophecies and the like, the public knows that tragedy is in the offing.⁵ Þorvaldr and his companions are lost in a storm on *Lagarfljót*. The lake, its shores and seasons (not least winter) are public spaces that figure in numerous episodes of the saga. Second sight and skill in magic are often associated in the family sagas with ethnic and geographical marginality and one may speculate that Droplaug's Shetland origins are alluded to here.⁶

Described as keenly feeling her husband's loss, Droplaug applies herself to the farm and her young family, accepting help from a benevolent neighbour, Bersi, who will later foster the two boys. Fosterage relieved one party of the economic burden of sustenance, made open display of support or patronage that might work to either party's advantage and naturally, in the constant-sum game of medieval Icelandic socio-economics, created an obligation.⁷ Droplaug's sister Gróa arrives in Iceland; Droplaug assists in her purchase of land, tellingly from a family whose numbers were great but means small. Gróa receives stock from her sister, uses her ship timbers to build a house (a concrete symbol of metamorphosis from immigrant to legitimate resident property-owner), and the saga continues:

Gróa syndi brátt af sér mikla risnu ok tók mikla vinsæld. Hun var kvenna minnst, en afbragðliga sjálig, greyp í skapi ok skörungr mikill ok forvitra. (237)

[She soon began to show great hospitality, and became very

popular. She was very small but uncommonly handsome, very shrewd, ruthless, and altogether a notable woman. (20)]

Gróa is a very successful stockraiser and as a now propertied and well-to-do widow can afford to turn down her numerous suitors so as to maintain her independence and power of social agency.

At a neighbouring farm, Droplaug becomes the subject of what, in the sagas, is never truly idle gossip,⁸ when farmhands speculate after a day's work as to a suitable match for their widowed master, Þórir. Droplaug is named as the pre-eminent woman of the district in this variant on the 'mannjafnaðr' [comparison of men] or 'maki' [match] topos,⁹ but is slandered by the malicious Þorgrímr *tordýfill* 'Dungbeetle'. She is accused of having shared her bed with her servant Svartr, a name typical of bondservants or slaves. Droplaug was herself an illegitimate child, since she was born during her mother's widowhood. Of greater consequence, in terms of personal honour and right to property, Þorgrímr casts doubt on Helgi Droplaugarson's legitimacy, which implies that Droplaug's crime was adultery and not a socially improper choice of sexual partner in her widowhood.

The close quarters of medieval Icelandic farmhouses offered little true privacy. The Dungbeetle's words are a performative utterance in public space – performative since they either change subsequent perceptions and an individual's standing or will provoke an active, non-verbal reaction, public space because such words are invariably, in the sagas, carried to neighbouring farmhouses. They are reported to Droplaug at a moment when her sons, aged twelve and ten, are out hunting ptarmigan. At this point, we do well to remember not only the saga convention of women's reaction to threats to family and personal honour, which could have long-term implications for standing and economy, but also the fact that within the fiction of the saga, Droplaug's main room is also public space. Her subsequent behaviour and speech will then not be driven solely by a highly personal anger at insult, but are to a degree to be seen as consciously staged, intentional in their effects on the boys, on the household servants, and on those to whom the scene will be reported at other farms. The mother's anger before the young hunters is reported as evident ('Hun var nú mjök hálfær ok mœlti fátt nema af styggð' (242)), but as if to heighten the mood by withholding information that would explain it, she proceeds by indirection, not speaking at once of the accusation by Þorgrímr and resulting gossip, but saying furiously of the ptarmigan hunting: 'Man ek aldri búa at síðr, þó at þit farið ekki at slíku'

(242) ['I will be just as happy to cook for you even if you don't go after such things' (25)]. This is saga style at its best and other examples, such as Þórarinn wondering why his son Þorsteinn is up so early in the morning (the time of women's work, 'Þorsteins þátr stangarhoggs'), instruct us and the boys to pose the question: 'If we were not supposed to be hunting ptarmigan, what should we have been doing?' To the boys' innocent rejoinder, Droplaug says:

'Má ok vera við þessa iðn, er þú hefir, at Þorgrími tordyfli þyki þú meir segjast í ætt Svarts þræls heldr en í ætt Þorvalds Þidrandasonar eða annarra Njarðvíkinga eða annarra þeirra, er mér þykja flestir íslenzkir lítills virðir hjá þeim'. (243)

['Perhaps it's because of this hunting that you seem to Thorgrim Dungbeetle to take more after the slave Svart than after Thorvald Thidrandason, or the family of the Njardvikings, or any other Icelanders I think highly of'. (25)]

Helgi makes a manly response, promising, without specifics, that the situation will change in one of two dramatic ways, and urges calm on his mother. This male stance will be considered in greater detail below. Droplaug makes no reply, and thus neither makes concessions nor gives encouragement.¹⁰

When the mission of vengeance is later undertaken by the two lads, their aunt Gróa becomes implicated. Her farm serves as staging post during the foray, she praises the boys for their action, saying only and perhaps somewhat ominously that Helgi has taken early to killing, and she assumes their defence when Þórir takes up physical and legal pursuit for the killing of Þorgrímr *tordyfill*. Both he and Gróa recognize the public positions that obligations of kinship and community status have dictated, he as prosecutor, she as defender, but both also value their personal tie based on mutual respect. Examples of this are not lacking in the family sagas, Njáll's and Gunnarr's efforts in *Njáls saga* to override their wives' contention being a prime example, but meeting an empowered woman in this role is less common.¹¹ The fact that the scene is between propertied widower and widow may give it an undercurrent of possible future negotiations on other issues. Droplaug's sister provides an illustration of woman's role in contention and feud other than the high-relief function of inciter to vengeance. Gróa's succinct and flattering

statement, which initiates the reconciliation, is worth repeating. Familiar enough with the logistics of feud to know that the boys could not have acted entirely on their own, Þórir has asked after them, and Gróa has replied that they are not at her farm:

... 'en þó er sem þeir sé hér. Þat, sem til tíðinda er orðit í ferð þeirra, þá vil ek taka máli fyrir þá. Gjörðu fé svó mikit sem þú vilt, en ek mun bæta – því at oss þykir lítils vert eins þræls dráp – heldr en þat fari í manna munna. En vit höfum átt vinskáp saman góðan, síðan ek kom hingat til lands. Ætla ek, at enn skyldi svó vera. Er þetta eigi stærra mál en svó, at vit megum þetta vel semja'. (248)

[... 'and yet it is as if they were here, because I will take up the case on their behalf for what has happened on their journey. Fix the fine as high as you like and I will pay it. The price of a slave's killing means little to us, compared with the talk of it going the rounds. You and I have been good friends since I came to this country, and I think we should stay so; this is not such a great matter than we cannot come to terms about it'. (29f.)]

Þórir acknowledges her past help to him and says she may set the fine herself. She fully exploits the returned power of agency by 'topping up' the conventional compensation with a valuable gold ring, further cementing their relationship by her magnanimity.¹² If we allow magnanimity a definition in terms of the specifics of medieval Icelandic values and extend its meaning via a spatial metaphor to include haven or refuge, we shall see that it is a touchstone in evaluating the women of *Fljótsdæla saga*. The dual position Gróa adopts in the matter of the killing of the slanderer – in relation to family and to community, both relevant to her own honour – exemplifies her personal qualities earlier stated in capsule form. Gróa's principal contributions to the remainder of the saga are a similar conciliatory gesture toward Bersi after the Helga episode (see below), and rescue of the near-dead Grímr from the battlefield and supervision of his sequestered convalescence, again a shielding action.

Droplaug's reaction to the news of the killing of Þorgrímr – her 'great satisfaction' ['mikil auðúsa'] – is stated only briefly. While Helgi may

have passed from child to near-man by the act of vengeance and thereby have enhanced his personal stature, Droplaug's honour has only been restored and her socio-economic situation has not altered. It is the latter that is the determining factor in her next substantial appearance in the saga, when her sons are adult.

A farmer, Hallsteinn, seeks Droplaug's hand in marriage. The reluctance of Bersi, as a local power-broker, to support his suit will be considered in the discussion of men's relations with men. The present concern is the analysis of the situation that Droplaug offers in the presence of Hallsteinn, Bersi and her sons (Ch. 23). She acknowledges that Hallsteinn, wealthier than she but of less social consequence, has seen their financial straits, the consequence of expenditure on general farm upkeep, maintenance of the members of the household, and replenishment of the milking stock. Her land-holding is adequate but she is unwilling to reduce her expense on hospitality. Her concise contractual offer to Hallsteinn entails 1) no dowry brought to their marriage, 2) joint possession of his goods (as distinct from land), and 3) on her death, joint inheritance of her share by her sons, Helgi and Grímr, and any children she has with Hallsteinn. Her motivation is the desire that her sons continue to enjoy the patrimony left by her first husband, Þorvaldr. As readily as Þórir had agreed to Gróa's terms, Hallsteinn agrees to Droplaug's. While women's actions are not checked by men's, in the longer course they may be circumscribed by them. Later developments bear out Bersi's misgivings about the inequality of the match and the likely sources of contention, which are not only between the couple because of Droplaug's autocratic character but also between the pairs of sons that each brings to the marriage.

Droplaug's sons show little appreciation of their mother's provisions for them; perhaps their honour was diminished both by her free disposal of her person and by the indirect debt they owed Hallsteinn for their continued financial security. Droplaug and Hallsteinn's relations are neither good nor hopelessly bad and a son is born. The Droplaugarsons occasionally visit their mother, but later are inexplicably slow to respond to a summons. Then, in an apparently unrelated incident, Helgi has Grímr accompany him on an outing on a stormy winter's day that will bring them unintentionally to Bersi's heathen temple. The unanswered summons, apparently arbitrary journey and accidental peripatetics contribute to a heightening effect, for Helgi's true destination has been Hallsteinn's farm. At this point the saga adds further suspense by a device which in cinematic terms could be called 'focus-pulling' and

which, for audience sympathy and ethical approbation, also represents a distancing. Droplaug, her sons and a slave are reported 'in the middle ground' in a private discussion which the sagaman does not open to his public. This narrative and moral marker in the sagas invariably means plotting to the disadvantage of a third party, and may be preparatory to a court appearance, legal ploy, or act of violence. Shortly thereafter, the slave kills Hallsteinn with Helgi's axe and Helgi kills the slave. But public gossip associates the private conversation (seen but not heard) with the killings. Droplaug, however, promptly claims her widow's due of the movable property and, just as her son is summoned on a murder charge, takes a ship to the Faroes, where she buys land and settles with her son by Hallsteinn. Thus, according to the various criteria of literary genre and ethics, considerable distance has been covered between the romance maiden rescued from a giant and immigrant to Iceland, and the ruthless, twice married family saga widow who emigrates under questioned circumstances. The judgmental stance that the author encourages his public to assume will be discussed after a review of other portraits and destinies.

Two other female characters attracted the sagaman's sustained interest and merit our attention: Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir and Þórdís Brodd-Helgadóttir. The former is the heroine of *Laxdæla saga*, here met during the years of her fourth and last marriage, to Þorkell Eyjólfsson. Guðrún and Þórdís are called on to play similar roles, that of harbouring a fugitive. Þórdís' presence in the saga is considerably weightier than Guðrún's and her protection of the man on the run actually precedes the Guðrún's. But in calling on his knowledge of the family saga corpus and in 'citing' the celebrated Guðrún, who in turn has legendary heroic antecedents in the Guðrún Gjúkadóttir of the *Edda* poems, the author puts an unmistakable seal of approval on the actions of Þórdís.¹³ Guðrún, having navigated the events of her love for Kjartan and his and her husband Bolli's death, is a friend of Helgi Ásbjarnarson, chief rival of Helgi Droplaugarson (see *infra*), and they have exchanged gifts. For reasons of local politics Helgi Ásbjarnarson has become the protector of the Norwegian Gunnarr who by a fluke bow-shot had killed the popular Þiðrandi Ketilsson. Helgi has sent Gunnarr west to Guðrún, his request for a service fitting into the prior alliance. Her husband Þorkell's relations with the various parties, however, have led him to promise publicly to kill the fugitive on sight. As the object of this attention is a foreigner and unrelated by blood or marriage to any of the factions, with the single tie of having taken a winter's lodging with one of the

principals, we have close to laboratory conditions to examine the conflict of interest (honour- and economy-related) and conflict of loyalty within this marriage. Gunnarr arrives in Þorkell's absence but is spotted by him near the evening fire and, after a brief exchange, the host swings his sword at the 'guest' (*Gestr* being Gunnarr's alias), a blow that Gunnarr parries. Guðrún arrives on the scene. Again it is the woman who seizes the initiative, issuing a contractual ultimatum (with legal terminology and temporal specifics), and again it the man who acquiesces.¹⁴

'Vil ek, at þú gjörir honum ekki grand, nema þú vilir, at vit skilim okkart félag upp frá þessum degi, ef þú gjörir honum nökkurt mein, því at Gunnar var mér sendr af vinum mínum til halds ok trausts. Skal ek hann svó annast sem son minn, til þess er skip ganga af Íslandi í sumar. En ef nökkur maðr vill hár af höfði honum blása, þá skal ek þeim [því]líkan grimmleik gjalda, sem ek má mestu á leið koma. En þat mæla sumir, at þat sé lítit gaman þeim, sem þat hafa reynt, at verða fyrir reiði minni. Skal ek þá ok ekki af spara, þat er illt er, ef ek verð vör við, at nökkur gjöri honum mein. Þat vil ek, at þú eigir ekki við hann, því at honum mun einhlít mín umsjá ok velgjörningr.' Þorkell svarar: 'Optast ertu ráðgjörn, Guðrún. Verðr optast engi hæfa á, ef þú ræðr eigi því, sem þú vilt. Verðum vér jafnan lítilmenni af, ef þú hlutast til'. (287)

['You'd better not hurt him unless you want us to part from this very day. Gunnarr was sent to me by friends for safe-keeping and protection. I shall take care of him as if he were my own son until ships sail from Iceland in the summer, and if anyone so much as pulls a hair from his head I'll pay them back such cruelty as best I can. Those who have experienced it say that it is no laughing matter to incur my wrath. I'll stop at nothing if I hear that anyone has hurt him. You'd better leave him quite alone; he will be safe in my kindly care.' Thorkel answered, 'You often want your own way, Gudrun; and there's no peace until you get it. We're often made to look small if you start meddling'. (66, translation modified)]

In this situation Guðrún has not had to choose between personal honour and family, or between kin and affines, but between the more 'masculine'

poles of attraction of local contractual alliance (marriage) and wholly personal socio-political alliance with a leader in a distant part of Iceland. The episode is given fuller development than its counterpart in *Laxdæla saga* (Ch. 69), primarily through the ascription of direct speech and greater rhetorical influence to Guðrún, and this is well in accord with the thematics of *Fljótisdæla saga*.

Þórdís, the sister of Bjarni Brodd-Helgason, is introduced in terms that we recognize from other female portraits – a concern for magnanimity – but the effect is softened by the suggestion of compassion for the poor and by other descriptors of temperament:

Hann átti sér systur, er Þórdís hét. Hun var fríð kona ok vel mennt. Viðmefni átti hun sér ok var kölluð Þórdís todða. Því var hun svó kölluð, at hun gaf aldri minna en stóra todða, þá er hun skyldi fátækum gefa, svó var hon örlát. Hun var skapstór ok skörungr mikill, skafinn drengur ok líklig til góðs forgangs, en þó var hun lítills virð heima. (239)

[He had a sister called Thordis who was a beautiful woman and most accomplished; she had a nickname and was called Thordis Todda ['bit, slice'], because she was so open-handed that when she was giving food to poor people, she gave nothing less than big portions. She was a proud and notable woman, strong, and well fitted to manage a house, though she was not thought much of at home. (22)]

Þórdís is married by her brother to Helgi Ásbjarnarson, a widower – the motif of remarriage bulks large in the saga – whose housekeeper soon thereafter gives birth to a daughter. (Helgi's first wife had been Bersi's daughter and the object of Helgi Droplaugarson's attention.) Þórdís raises the girl as her own, compensates the now dismissed housekeeper, and wins public acclaim in this and other actions. But a year after the marriage, she requests that her husband sell his land and purchase property in a less accessible area, because the numbers of those making claims on her hospitality is greater than the household's means. In this family matter, Þórdís' statement underscores the earlier summary evaluation of her character and reflects to her credit. Yet if we trust in the narrative economy of the family saga genre, we must inquire whether the little domestic scene does not contain additional information. While

there is no indication of tension between the couple, and Helgi accedes to Þórdís' request to move, one might speculate that Helgi's economic situation is not on a level with the figure the couple or the wife would cut in the district, or with the eminence and vulnerable accessibility, combining influence and obligation, that were Helgi's in the chieftainship he shared with his cousin Hrafnkell.

When Þiðrandi died at the hand of Gunnarr, many people in the district mourned the loss; these include the Droplaugarsons, and Bjarni Brodd-Helgason and his sister Þórdís, who were kin of the deceased. Þórdís' nominal position would then be to desire revenge and compensation. Þorkell *fullspakr* 'the Very Wise', son of the dead Ketill on whose behalf Gunnarr had loosed the fatal arrow, had honoured Ketill's household's obligation toward its guest and sheltered Gunnarr, prior to his intended transfer to the protection of the co-chieftain Helgi Ásbjarnarson, a clandestine manoeuvre through which Helgi Droplaugarson astutely sees. Gunnarr is sent running from his hiding place by Helgi's approaching party but eventually, with the aid of the uncanny and independently minded Sveinungr, is brought to Helgi Ásbjarnarson's farm. Helgi's obligations as chieftain call him to the local assembly and he commends Gunnarr to Þórdís' care while he is away. She feigns surprise, recalls that she had publicly promised to have Gunnarr killed if he could be found, and says that she will send him to her brother Bjarni to execute her threat. Her husband points out the prestige she now enjoys thanks to her marriage to him and threatens to turn her out if she were to betray Gunnarr, so that she would have to seek shelter with the brother for whom she had earlier counted for so little. Helgi, like Guðrún, seems ready to sacrifice his marriage to meet honour's obligation. Þórdís belittles his threat, saying that Bjarni will not keep her any worse than Helgi. Þórdís' dilemma is not so much founded in her kinship with the dead Þiðrandi as, more immediately, in her publicly stated desire for revenge, against which she must measure her husband's wishes and the responsibility he has assumed for the fugitive. That same evening Þórdís' brother Bjarni appears with a large party and is well received. She and Bjarni have a private conversation, probably in a bed closet. Bjarni has thought through the entire affair, even down to the threat of dismissal that Helgi would make against his wife and to Þórdís' now proffered disclaimers to any information about Gunnarr, yet he is confident that his sister will favour him and relinquish the killer. When Þórdís will acknowledge nothing, Bjarni makes an offer of money. Þórdís observes that he is less close-fisted than formerly and

says she would take the money if she had any knowledge in the matter.

With this brother and sister part for the night. But by dawn Þórdís has sent a message to her husband at the Assembly saying that she has guests she cannot properly entertain, her brother Bjarni. Helgi reads the situation correctly and returns with his party, but not before Bjarni has reluctantly taken his morning leave, unwilling to subject his sister to a house-ransacking as one would a thief. In so doing his own honour suffers, since he returns from his errand empty-handed. Helgi reaches home and Þórdís gives him an account of events while both are still outdoors, thus in public, but withholds one key detail. She says that she has set more store by her husband than by anyone else. Only when Helgi commends her for being both a good wife and splendid woman does she reveal the attempted bribe. Þórdís' account of events is deployed in such a way as to earn her husband's public praise for her principled stand in his favour, before the money is mentioned. Yet her recall of this last stage of negotiation with her brother seems intended to prompt the saga public to speculate that it was the insult to her personal honour in the form of the tendered bribe that sealed her determination not to surrender the fugitive. Perhaps Bjarni was playing on the couple's straitened economic circumstances, but having made a tactical mistake in private he is unwilling to make a greater one in public the next morning by undertaking an armed search of the house in his brother-in-law's absence. Þórdís comes out the true winner in this double encounter, recipient of her brother's public respect through his withdrawal, her husband's public praise, Gunnarr's gratitude (we must assume, the scene is not shown), and the saga public's admiration for her concern for personal honour. The confrontation has also given her an opportunity to repay her brother for his mean treatment when she was under the familial roof, a treatment expressly at odds with her temperament and its impulse toward magnanimity and hospitality. Gunnarr eventually passes to Guðrún's hands and the saga then turns to Droplaug's second marriage, thus setting up a comparison between Þórdís and Droplaug in the area of largesse and economic interest. In the latter part of the saga, Þórdís' chief concern is the safety of her husband, Helgi, when it is learned that Grímr survived the battle in Eyvindardal.

One more female cameo deserves our attention under the heading of principled women, although here as in other instances we shall see that principle is not unaccompanied by practicality. Helga Þorbjarnardóttir is a favourite of Bersi, who has often given her gifts but does not appear to have matrimonial intentions, perhaps because of the difference in age and

social station, perhaps because her father was sufficiently wealthy not to see an advantage in the union. Bersi's foster-son Helgi Droplaugarson has been paying the girl attention, for reasons that will be explored below, in an effort to come to grips with his ambiguous dealings with Bersi. Helgi and Helga have reached some degree of intimacy and he invites her to spend the winter months at their home, which at this point in the saga is still being run by Droplaug. She agrees, but later in the day, when they are about to leave, recalls that Nollar, the brother of the dead Dungbeetle, had been in the room earlier in the day. We have a measure of the main hall of such buildings as public places in Helga's apprehension that he may have learned or sensed what their plans were.

'Kynligt þyki mér, ef hann þykist eigi vís orðinn nokkurra tíðinda. Mun ek hvergi fara daglangt, því at ek get hann þangat njósnir farit hafa, at mér þætti vel, at hann yrði lygimaður af'. (251)

['It wouldn't surprise me if he imagined that he had got hold of some news. I'm certainly not going with you today, for I think he has taken his story where I'd like him to be shown up as a liar'. (33)]

As in the case of Bjarni, above, Helga displays the skilful chess-player's ability to predict several of her opponent's moves. Her worry is that the planned trip may be reported to Bersi in order to prompt his intervention and, indeed, this scene has already been played out between the verbally coercive Nollar and the almost imperturbable Bersi. Helgi says that he won't ask again and Helga replies that that may well be, but that she is not going that day. Overanalysis should not be forced on the brief scene but, if we take it as given that Helga's presence at the Droplaugarsons' farm would eventually have become public knowledge and that she was prepared to undertake the trip without any prior explanation to Bersi, then her principal motive must have been fear of alienating Bersi through the skewed version of intentions that Nollar would put on this gossip or her desire to punish the malicious Nollar by pointing him up as a liar. It is difficult to put her change of mind down to a concern for personal honour, since she was prepared to make the visit and would foresee what interpretation other malicious tongues might put on it, unless, again, her objection was that Nollar's first telling of these events would have a

determining influence on their future interpretation. Perhaps we need to know more about medieval Icelandic social conventions of hospitality, reciprocal visits and extended stays at allies' and relatives' farms, particularly as this affected the status and reputation of the unmarried. Elsewhere in the saga, non-attendance at feasts and other declined invitations are clear social signals. With this brief scene, another instance of female decision-making, Helga is gone from the saga.

*

After this terse exchange, and with some raised questions concerning Helgi Droplaugarson's personality and motivations, we may turn from the principled women of the saga to the men under pressure. This external and internal coercion to less than fully willed action takes a number of forms, some of which can be summarily dealt with. Ketill *þrymr* 'the Unruly' (also called *Þrum-Ketill*), for example, suffers from what appears a neurological disorder, chills followed by an inner heat that takes the form of rage. The latter can be readily directed, as when Ásbjörn the wall-builder exploits Ketill's fit of fury to complain that he has been ill-treated by approaching visitors. This bit of casual malice, as so often in the sagas, has fatal results and leads to an armed confrontation between Ketill and his nephew, Þiðrandi Geitisson, a clash that neither would have wished under calmer circumstances. Here physical attack compels the unwilling Þiðrandi to defend himself. It will result in Ketill's death at the hands of Þiðrandi and then Þiðrandi's own death by Gunnarr the Norwegian's lucky/unlucky arrow shot (further discussed below).

Reflexes of the scene of social pressure involving Ketill and Ásbjörn are played out in *Fljótsdæla saga* a number of times and raise its fundamental problematic to thematic status. In its simplest terms, a client or dependent approaches a chieftain or family head and requests his support, in a punitive action, legal case or marriage suit. The leader may think the matter trivial or the plaintiff unworthy of help and refuse action until the latter, in wily and malicious fashion, disparages his honour and manliness, and thereby forces an action that otherwise lacks emotional imperative or social or political advantage. In this saga the manipulative underling never enjoys audience sympathy and often proves a physical coward to boot. A detailed consideration of one instance of this type scene will be followed by a listing of similarly structured scenes and their comparable motivations.

After Þorgrímr *tordyfill*, driven by his interior compulsion to malicious comment, has been killed for defaming Droplaug, his brother Nollar, met above in the context of Helga's putative visit to Helgi, seeks out Helgi Ásbjarnarson for his support in pursuing the case for compensation. His initial appeal is a reasonable one:

‘Því fór ek á þinn fund, at þú ert vór höfðingi. Þyki mér þú skyldastr til at losa vandræði manna í heradinu, þó at eigi falli jafnstórt til sem nú er orðit, en ella er ekki skot til þín’. (249)

[It's you I came to see, you are our chieftain, and it seems to me it's up to you to settle the difficulties of people in the neighbourhood even when our troubles aren't as bad as they now are; otherwise it's no good appealing to you'. (30)]

Helgi stays out of the matter, creating a degree of suspense that builds toward the later, seemingly inevitable confrontation with his namesake, Helgi Droplaugarson. Nollar takes a rather more forward tack with Bersi, perhaps because he is aware that the prospect of Bersi's protégée, Helga, going to spend the winter with Helgi has an emotional dimension that he can inflame to his advantage. Nollar's rhetorical strategy in the following coercive, eventually shaming speech is a different one from that adopted before Helgi Ásbjarnarson. He starts by saying that Helgi Droplaugarson plans to seduce Helga and thereby betray Bersi's trust. Bersi appears to see through Nollar's motives, and asks why he, Bersi, is being told this, and goes on to wish Helga and Helgi well, although he would have thought her somewhat beneath him in social rank. Nollar then makes an *ad hominem* appeal:

‘Satt er þat þó at segja, at útlifat hafa nú kappar Fljótsdæla, er þeir láta eitt sveinsnykri taka af sér konur, þar sem þú ert svó ærr fyrir henni, at þú gáir einskis. Mun ek láta af at segja þér, þó at ek verða vís, at þú lætr sem þú vitir eigi, þó at þér sé sneypa gjör. Reynist þá skaplyndi yðart, er eigi er við þá um at eiga, er yðr þykir dælt við. Er ok því síðr dád í yðr, er meir er á yðr leitat’. (250f.)

[‘It's true then to say that the leaders of Fljotsdale are worn-out

men who let a worthless boy take their women away from them and yours the one you're so mad for that you attend to nothing else. I might as well stop telling this, for I'm sure you'll pretend to know nothing of it even when you're disgraced. So now we see that the more familiar the terms you're on with anyone, the less you can deal with him; and the more you're insulted the less you stand up for yourself'. (32)]

Like the accusations of victimization in homosexual rape by men, animals and supernatural beings, such aspersions on manliness or, to put it into more operative terms, on male adequacy and agency always lead to armed reaction.¹⁵ However unwilling Bersi may be to undertake the prosecution of this matter, he cannot passively let the slur to his honour go unchallenged. Similar public shaming occurs between Ásbjörn the wall-builder and Ketill *þrymr*, to a more moderate extent in Hallsteinn's critical comment on Bersi's reluctance to back his suit for Droplaug's hand, and finally and fatally in Þorgrímr *skinnhúfa* 'Fur-Cap' recalling to Helgi Ásbjarnarson his statement that from his next meeting with Helgi Droplaugarson only one would leave alive. This coercion of leader by client or of powerful kinsman by dependent one is preferentially deployed in *Fljótsdæla saga*, which, except for the scene of Droplaug before her sons, lacks the comparably structured scenes of women inciting reluctant kinsmen to vengeance.

The similar coercive threats between spouses could also have economic consequences, if one party's share were withdrawn from the union, and also an important effect on the personal honour of the abandoned or dismissed party. In contrast we have the generous provision of help by the uncanny Sveinungr, when Gunnarr appeals to him without any qualifying reference to his manliness, leading to one of the best told incidents in the saga, Helgi Droplaugarson's futile search for Gunnarr at Sveinungr's farm.

Fljótsdæla saga offers examples of other kinds of coercion well known from the family sagas, for example, Helgi Droplaugarson somewhat earlier forcing Þorkell *fullspakr* on pain of death to reveal the whereabouts of the fugitive Gunnarr. The sexual dimension of shaming is, however, never far distant. A telling example is the petty revenge that Helgi takes on Bersi's servants when, on Bersi's orders (and after Nollar's provocation), they have pursued him, Grímr and, they believe, Helga in the sledge. Helgi and Grímr overpower and tie up the two men,

forcing their heads between their legs and placing a rod behind the nape of their necks and under their knees so that the men's faces are forced towards their buttocks. A similar but more extreme measure, in that the head was severed and placed with the face to the anus, was used by the boys' father to prevent the giant from rising from the dead. In the sagas this practice is employed to lay revenants ('draugar'), the social logic apparently being that one who had been forced into a position of coprophagy would be too shamed to return to haunt the community.¹⁶

In several of these examples we see that it is the prior position of prominence that makes the leader or chieftain vulnerable on the count of honour to pressure exerted by a social (and often moral) inferior. Words once said cannot be undone or spatially contained ('kemr opt at því, sem mœlt er, at ferr orð, er um munn líðr' (242)). Honour also figures in husband and wife, brother and sister confrontations, as between Helgi and Þórdís, Bjarni and Þórdís. A situational predicament, as distinct from an emotion-driven involvement, is also behind Gunnarr's immediately regretted killing of Ketill. Norwegians in Iceland are generally not popular figures in the family sagas (see below), but Gunnarr is cast as an honest, brave and resourceful man, and his adventures as fugitive, told with verve, engage the saga public's sympathy (see the separate telling in *Gunnars þáttur Þiðrandabana*, perhaps part of a lost *Njardvíkinga saga*).¹⁷ As noted, without family or other compelling ties in Iceland, Gunnarr is situated in a streamlined set of circumstances in which to observe fundamental social pressures at work, here the mutual obligations of host and guest.

Events leading to Gunnarr's involvement exhibit a pattern familiar from other episodes of the saga, what might be called the contingency factor at work. Gunnarr is sitting indoors feathering arrows and is unaware of the armed clash out in the farmyard. A servant woman rushes in, but has an oratorically structured statement ready; it passes from proverbial wisdom to hypothesis, defamatory insult (female, animal imagery) and finally the simple and essential fact of homicide:

'Satt er þat, er mælt er, at eigi má mann sjá, hverr hvergi er. Mundi Ketill eigi þat ætla at hausti, er hann bauð þér hingat, at honum mundi enginn brautargangr at þér verða, ef hann þyrfti nökkurs við, en þú ert mannfyla því meiri, er þú liggr inni kyrr sem hundr á hvelpum, þar sem húsbóndi þinn er lagðr við velli ok margir hans menn. Er hér kominn ófriðargangr, ok hafa þeir vegit Ketil'. (265)

['It's true what they say that no one can see a man who's not there at all. When Ketil asked you here in the autumn he can't have imagined that he would get no help from you when he needed it. And you're all the more of a foul wretch lying indoors like a bitch with whelps while the man of the house lies dead in the field, and many of his men with him. There are raiders here, and they've killed Ketil'. (45)]

Gunnarr rushes out with his newly feathered arrow, has Þiðrandi pointed out at a distance, kills him with his first shot, and immediately disowns his action. Thus, Gunnarr, too, has been coerced, albeit with less reluctance than other men in the saga. A good sense of the mutual obligations of host and guest is given by the servant's reference to 'húsbóndi þinn' despite the fact that Gunnarr has been there only a few months. His regret, honesty and subsequent stamina earn the respect of all, so that his pursuit becomes in a certain sense a formal matter, and this, too, may have influenced Þórdís' decision not to disclose his whereabouts to her brother.

It was earlier stated that Þorgrímr *tordyfill* was under 'psychological pressure' to act in the slanderous fashion he did. This is an overreading, albeit intentional and for heuristic purposes, in that the character is seen in only two related episodes, precluding any deeper penetration into motive than that made possible by the author's categorical statement of qualities: 'kvikligr, orðmargr ok illorðr, heimskr ok illgjarn' (240) ['brisk and lively, talkative, scurrilous, stupid and malicious' (23)]. 'Psychological pressure' also reflects modern conceptions of personality. The slanderer/mockers is a stock, often grotesque character in the sagas, usually a peripheral figure but often acting, like his female counterpart, the impoverished itinerant gossip, as a catalyst to feud-related action. Such mockers usually end badly. Thus Þorgrímr serves the ends of plot but, as personality *in extenso*, is not designed as an object for speculative reflection. That some figures of the family sagas did invite such reflection on the part of original readers and audiences and continue to do so for readers of later generations seems beyond question: Kjartan and Guðrún in *Laxdæla saga* in their love for, and spite toward, each other, Gunnarr in *Njáls saga* in his relationship with his wife and in his doubt over his reluctance to take to killing. These are characters of a different order of complexity and subject to greater internal conflict than Óláfr pái, who rejects an Irish throne, or Njáll, who is a deep thinker but not deep personality, despite his foresight, devious and wily public agency, and

evolution from 'law-obedient' convert to Christianity to exponent of a new morality and faith. As prophet and plotter, Njáll exists largely in a future mode, lacking personal historical depth.

But analysis of even the most richly documented saga characters has definite limits that are soon met. We have not a growing clinical log but a finite fictional artifact, and no interrogation is possible. Nonetheless, Helgi Droplaugarson of *Fljótsdæla saga* provides an interesting example of the relative availability of data to fuel such speculation. Perhaps part of the inclination to do so lies in the fact that, distinct from the case of the 'Dungbeetle' above, the author provides a physical not a moral portrait of Helgi in the capsule form that is typical of the sagas at or shortly after the introduction of characters. The single non-physical descriptor is the adjective *kurteis*, which seems to relate exclusively to the social *persona* and is immediately followed by a rather disconcerting or deflating reference to his ugly mouth. Equally absent from the saga is any mention by other characters of Helgi as a 'gœfumaðr' [man of luck] or its opposite.¹⁸ The events and situations of the saga that might provide a platform for sounding the depths of a historically, culturally conditioned but still fictional personality 'under pressure' will be summarized in the following. It should be noted that such an assemblage of 'psychological data' (which is here given a purposely contemporary cast to underline its essential artificiality) is not a synopsis of all Helgi's public actions in the saga, although it is intended to illuminate them.

*

Helgi is the elder of two brothers, the red-haired, impetuous one ('ágjarn', Bersi's evaluation). The boys lose their father when Helgi is six years of age and are then known by the metronymic, Droplaugarsynir. The fraternal tie is close, as Helgi insists that Grímr accompany him into fosterage at Bersi's farm, they walk side by side, each seeks to avenge the other. Helgi and Grímr circulate among the households of Droplaug, Gróa and Bersi, the latter two of whom, as maternal aunt and foster-father, may be seen as positively disposed surrogate parents. Two of their most significant undertakings are facilitated by the use of Gróa's pampered gelding. The boys had been favoured, if not spoiled, before coming under effective male control or direction. While specifics are lacking, aspects of Bersi's character that are illuminated by other events suggest a grandfather figure intent on teaching them generosity and wisdom and posing even less a perceived threat to the youths' emerging masculinity than might a father. The apparent harmony of this relationship is shattered when Bersi agrees to marry his daughter to

Helgi, the son of Ásbjörn, who is prepared to make over a share of a chieftainship to his son as part of the marriage agreement. Thus Helgi Droplaugarson is indirectly introduced – for he refuses to attend the marriage ceremony – to an older namesake who acquires, at a stroke, economic and political power, his foster-sister Þorlaug Bersadóttir, and the preferred status of son-in-law of Bersi. This Helgi becomes *disponible* as both adversary and less complex *alter ego*, although he is initially reluctant to become involved in affairs lying within the other Helgi's sphere of influence. For Helgi Droplaugarson, his brother Grímr is the temperate opposite, Helgi Ásbjarnarson the alternative. Public opinion is invoked by the sagaman to offer an additional insight into Helgi's state after this marriage: 'ok hafa þat margir menn fyrir satt, at Helga Droplaugarsyni væri aptírsjá at um gjaforð þessarar konu' (238) [and many people believed that Helgi Droplaugarson had wanted this woman for himself (21)]. Here, there is some temporal telescoping, with adolescent or adult desires being ascribed to the young, for Helgi is not yet twelve, but the inference is that he wanted Þorlaug as a future wife (with dowry?), not as a sister. The brothers henceforth spend less time at Bersi's home. The new marriage is successful, but short-lived as Þorlaug dies in a winter accident when her sledge breaks through the ice and she is drowned. Helgi Ásbjarnarson will later marry Þórdís *todda*, met above. Þorlaug is then an irretrievably closed chapter for Helgi Droplaugarson, except as it affects his ongoing relationships with his foster-father and with Helgi Ásbjarnarson.

The next significant event in this fictional biography is the effort to repair Droplaug's honour by killing the slanderer Þorgrímr. Droplaug's coercive statement, reviewed above, was not immediately acted on. Was some degree of physical or emotional maturation required? Or did only tactical considerations delay the act of vengeance? The lads' punitive foray is undertaken without knowing Þorgrímr's exact whereabouts, although awareness of seasonal rural tasks may have played a role in the winter expedition. The vengeance is straightforward and, age disparity aside, is that of an armed man against an unarmed social inferior. While some honour accrues from the boys' precocity in killing, the objective is the re-establishment of the mother's reputation and, on the personal level, the regaining of her favour. Compensation for the killing, it was noted, is handled by Gróa, who has the clout and economic means to close the case satisfactorily.

But Helgi was not simply content to kill Þorgrímr; he also humiliated the corpse by strapping it to the rear of the sledge, bent

forward with the rump prominent ('Hann tekr reip ór sleðanum ok bindr hann á bak fram við silann. Tordyfill sitr nú heldr gneypr á baki' (246)). Similar debasement is seen in Helgi's treatment of Bersi's servants, bound with their heads between their legs. At Bersi's request he later provides the two servants with compensatory gifts, manhood restored in the form of a sword and axe. Finally, in a much later confrontation at the Assembly, Helgi Droplaugarson says to Helgi Ásbjarnarson, when the latter had smiled at a slip of Helgi's tongue in the course of a court statement: 'Þar stendr Hrafnkell á baki þér, Helgi' (282) ['Hrafnkel is standing there behind you, Helgi']. Helgi's father, Ásbjörn, had administered the estate of Hrafnkell and his mother during his nephew's minority and, while the saga is not explicit in the matter, seems to have assumed or arrogated a portion of the 'goðorð', which he then transferred to Helgi. The cousins, Helgi and Hrafnkell, had contended over the joint chieftainship and Helgi had been forced to make concessions.

Sørensen's close and convincing analysis (*Unmanly Man*, 64ff.) of the sexual innuendo subjacent to Gísli's versified crowing over knocking down Þorgrímr in the ballgame on the ice in *Gísla saga* (Ch. 15) alerts us to subtle insults based on the symbolism of male rape as physical and political dominance. The maltreatment of the former slave and the servants is at the cruder end of the spectrum. Such actions seem to have lain on the periphery of what was socially acceptable. As is observed concerning the 'níðstong' or pole of defamation erected in *Bjarnar saga Híttdælakappa* (Ch. 17) showing one man standing close behind another: greater shame attached to the man in front, but the man behind was not blameless.¹⁹ The relevance of the three shaming incidents in *Fljótsdæla saga* and the similar disrobing of the gods in Bersi's temple to the present discussion is that for Helgi Droplaugarson conventional supremacy is not enough; symbolic debasement of opponents accompanies his triumphs over slaves, men and gods.²⁰

To return to the historical sequence of events in Helgi's life, the next major development is in his relationship with his foster-father Bersi, when he seeks to move his friendship with Bersi's younger female friend Helga past the stage of frequent visits to an invitation that she join him for the winter months at Arneiðarstaðir, an invitation interpreted *in malam partem* by Þorgrímr's brother, Nollar, as an effort to seduce her. Is this an act of petty revenge on Bersi for the earlier marriage of his daughter to Helgi Ásbjarnarson? Or an effort to recreate the earlier circumstances of a sororal figure in Bersi's home? Or, coming only two days after the killing of Þorgrímr, a further announcement of adult male

status?²¹ Helgi may be thought to have relinquished Helga rather promptly on her refusal to accompany him that day, but again we are dealing with a snub to male honour, which required repayment in kind. Bersi, cast in a benevolent and magnanimous role, is the last to think ill (in public statement) of the young couple, but does remark on the social disparity. When Bersi eventually confronts Helgi and learns that nothing had happened – in the strict honour-related sense of physical event, intentions aside – he patches over the situation, saying that he had come only to offer advice against the machinations of slanderers. But Bersi also warns Helgi firmly against any future disruption of his son Ormsteinn's affairs (a true succession matter), a rather arbitrary comment unless we also credit Bersi with our suspicion that Helgi's attention to Helga was in part motivated by a desire to irritate Bersi, to appropriate 'his woman'. Again, here, Gróa assists via gifts in reconciling the parties, but Helgi also gives Bersi fine gifts on his departure. Bersi's laughter over the inconvenience suffered by the two bound servants and the thrashing subsequently administered to Nollar has a directive influence on audience judgments and we are invited to put these latter events down to the Droplaugarsons' high spirits and slight over-reaction. But the episode concludes with an proleptic authorial comment that afterwards Helgi never courted nor was in love with another woman ('Dad's girl or no girl?'). With one exception, of an ideological nature, there is no further tension between Bersi and Helgi; this seems to mark the achievement of a certain emotional independence on the part of the latter.

A more telling authorial intervention is made toward the close of the Gunnarr episode, when Helgi seeks the fugitive at the farm of Sveinungr, who successfully hides him in three different locations and artfully limits, through his complaints and reference to legal procedure, the ransacking of his house and property. At one point Gunnarr is hidden in a haystack. Helgi searches but then goes away. 'Sjá hlutr er sá, at mörgum aflar tvímælis á, at Helga muni áræðisfátt orðit hafa, þá er þeir vóru tveir inni, ok muni hann þá sét hafa, en þótt eigi til ráðanda' (277) [The fact is that many people think Helgi lacked courage when just the two of them (Helgi and Sveinungr) were in the barn, and that he may have seen Gunnarr then, but thought it unwise to do anything (56f.)]. Thus we have a diminution of Helgi in the public eye, as well as the suggestion of less than full confidence in his own ability to face up to Sveinungr. Prudence also carried a risk to honour. The older saga convention was that those skilled in the dark arts could disorient a pursuer's visual perceptions so that a fugitive remained hidden, with clarity of sight coming only later

and at a distance.²² Here we have only a hint of Sveinungr as practitioner of magic plus a rationalizing explanation. Helgi suffers a more overt humiliation when he visits Sveinungr's equally uncanny brother Gunnsteinn, who grips Helgi's arm so strongly in the course of a meal that he drops his knife in paralysis.

The symbolic importance that might attach to this last episode will introduce a brief excursus on weaponry. Helgi's father Þorvaldr used the giant's sword to free Droplaug from her bonds and then to give the giant a fatal wound, but not before the latter had cursed the sword, saying that it would fail its future owners in times of need. When Þorvaldr makes his fatal lake crossing, it is after being persuaded to leave the sword at home (an incident handled rather awkwardly by the saga). The paternal heritage, however, is too large for the boys to take on their attack against Þorgrímr. Nor does the saga have any episode later in Helgi's life when he is said to use the weapon. On his way to his death in the battle in Eyvindardal he leaves the weapon for refurbishing at a nearby farm. The surrogate weapon that he takes is less effective in the battle. Thus, the giant's curse has come true. As often in the sagas a foreign weapon is inadequate to Icelandic circumstances or will be used in less than an honourable way,²³ but in other symbolic terms Helgi is improperly matched with the supernatural weapon. Grímr will later use it to avenge Helgi, but in a stealthy nocturnal murder.

The next data of note in the review of Helgi's 'psychology' are the events leading to and following his mother's marriage to Hallsteinn. Helgi and Grímr disapprove, although the marriage is clearly to their economic advantage. As suggested, public knowledge that Droplaug had agreed to the union largely to safeguard their economic future may have had a demeaning effect. In a recall of the wedding of Bersi's daughter, Helgi declines to attend the feast. Finally, when Helgi is summoned to the farm, vacillates, then goes and consults with his mother, we must assume that it is not Helgi who is taking the initiative in the murder of Hallsteinn – otherwise he would doubtless have acted on his own – but again, as in the killing of Þorgrímr, he is the agent of his mother's intentions. Just before the killing the saga introduces a last subject of contention between Helgi and Bersi. This is the latter's attachment to the heathen gods, for whom he maintains a rich temple. Since Christianity reached Iceland only a year before Helgi's death according to the closing lines of the saga, and Helgi is not explicitly called a convert or otherwise characterized as either a monotheistic believer in the creator of the sun and all things²⁴ or an agnostic who scoffingly believes only in his own

might (another stock character), one may speculate that the desecration of Bersi's temple, apparently on the spur of the moment when Helgi and Grímr get lost in a storm on the way to Hallsteinn's farm (a kind of symbol of ethical erring?), is largely directed at Bersi the conservative paternal figure as an expression either of jealousy of his attachment to these idols or of simple spite. Helgi's immediate pretext is to blame the gods for his wandering in the snowstorm. On the other hand, the vocabulary of condemnation attributed by the author to Helgi in his earlier dispute with Bersi and then in the description of the idols is so clearly Christian ('dólgr', 'fjándr' [fiend]) that we may well have here more an authorial statement than a further revelation of Helgi's personality.²⁵

Hallsteinn's death leads to a legal charge against Helgi; the contention with Helgi Ásbjarnarson that had been maintained through the Gunnarr affair now comes openly to the fore: While *Droplaugarsona saga* provides more evidence of Helgi Droplaugarson seeking to diminish his namesake, *Fljótsdæla saga* is content to have Helgi say 'We are on bad terms' (49). It should be noted that the two Helgis never contend over their own property claims or the possession of a chieftainship. Helgi Droplaugarson has little support in the homicide case, in which public opinion has already judged him negatively, and he is condemned to outlawry. As well, he carries Helgi Ásbjarnarson's threat of physical violence when the two next meet outside the court environment, as a consequence of the episode of the misspoken legal phrase and allusion to the shadow of Hrafnkell behind Helgi Ásbjarnarson. Strikingly, this is the only confrontation of the two that is given relief through the (limited) use of direct discourse, a narrative strategy that has the effect of making the enviable Helgi Ásbjarnarson an even more elusive adversary. Although in reality only malicious repartee, the exchange significantly treats of honour, not of legal claims or supposed offences.²⁶

When the fatal battle occurs between the two Helgis, the saga is conventional in recounting Helgi's ominous dreams, the ill-chosen moment to have his sword refurbished, his parting from his mistress or confidante ('hjalskona'), his fatalism, observance of the heroic code. In the battle Helgi gives Helgi Ásbjarnarson an incapacitating wound to the leg, but from a distance. Helgi's predilection for shaming comment is illustrated although directed toward another. When Grímr falls, Helgi is prepared to risk all to reach his namesake who had withdrawn from the fray to the side, where he is being watched over by Ozurr from Áss, who had been Helgi Droplaugarson's heathen 'god-father'. Helgi says he has

nothing to fear from Ozurr, but the latter thrusts at him with his spear to protect his chieftain. This provides Helgi with the occasion to say publicly that Ozurr had betrayed him. In a detail borrowed from the death of Þorgeirr in *Fóstbræðra saga* (Ch. 17) the saga recounts that Helgi then forced himself forward onto the spear in order to reach Ozurr with his sword. When Ozurr wrenches the spear to one side, Helgi dies.

Public inquiry as to how Helgi acquitted himself in the fatal battle allows him to leave the saga with a slight heroic nimbus and throughout he has shown the initiative so valued in medieval Iceland. To the degree that Bersi's instruction concerned conventional male values and the paramount importance of honour, Helgi had been a good student. But in these closing episodes we note that Droplaug leaves Iceland with her young son, Helgi has not married and leaves no descendants. Thus Droplaug and her elder son, the temperamental brother, the one who always wanted things his own way (Ch. 11), are but episodic in the larger history of Saga Age Iceland, while Helgi Ásbjarnarson received from the sons of Hallsteinn, whom he had represented legally, timber for a hall which was still standing in the author's day. It is the milder, steadier brother, Grímr Droplaugarson, the reluctant accomplice in many of Helgi's actions but his determined avenger, who is cited at the close of the saga as the ancestor of the author. Grímr, who survived the battle in Eyvindardal, left for Norway where he defeated a berserk in an extra-Icelandic coda paralleling the rescue of Droplaug from the giant on Shetland at the beginning of the saga. Poisoned by the fighter's mistress, Grímr died and his widow and son return to Iceland. Thus Iceland seems turned back on itself, the ambiguity of contact with the greater world exemplified in the split in behavioural pattern displayed by Droplaug and Gróa, or between the qualities of the Norwegian Gunnarr and the effect of his actions in Iceland.

In attempting to determine the importance, if not yet the signification, of the psychological data supplied by *Fljótsdæla saga* on Helgi Droplaugarson, it is instructive to consider the portrait offered by the early or mid-thirteenth century *Droplaugarsona saga*, which the later author certainly knew well. In the earlier work, Helgi is cast as a bluff, hearty, handsome figure, his impetuosity is less prominent, and even the ugly mouth is suppressed. The last-named may have been an exteriorization of Helgi's tendency toward scurrility or may be in the nature of a back formation from a preserved anecdote of his facial wound at Eyvindardal, which allows him the heroic words and gesture of saying that he was never handsome and is less so now, and tucking his beard

into his mouth to hold his teeth in place while fighting on. The earlier saga has no humiliation of the Dungbeetle's corpse, no contention with Bersi over Helga, and emphasis in agonistic relationships is shifted toward the other Helgi. We learn that Helgi Droplaugarson sought involvement in court cases that would match him against his namesake or would supplant him as the influential patron, and that he assisted Hrafnkell in getting some operational control over the jointly owned 'goðorð'. With these latter incidents the earlier saga provides a more convincing build-up toward the final meeting of the two Helgis. Similarly, complaints brought against Helgi Droplaugarson for deficiency in the matter of proclaiming killings and covering corpses make psychologically more plausible the plot to kill his mother's second husband via a socially inferior accomplice. But in both works the final confrontation between the namesakes is initiated by Helgi Droplaugarson's support of a woman in a unilateral divorce action, a situation in which the husband, as offended party, turns to Helgi Ásbjarnarson for support. Women's decisive actions, which always bear on the marriage contract to some degree, mark *Fljótsdæla saga* to its end.

There is both a public and a private Helgi Droplaugarson in each of the two sagas. *Fljótsdæla saga* offers a more interiorized portrait than *Droplaugarsona saga* and, with its emphasis on psychic dynamics rather than social agency, suggests a more complex personality. Recognizing the determining if not decisive effect of the externally and culturally imposed honour code, we may risk some judgment, both psychological and ethical, on the basis of the varied evidence of the later saga. In summary, 1) the contrasting attention paid to women in the architectonics of the saga as empowered agents directed by principle, 2) Helgi's failure to pursue the path of a chieftainship (perhaps never open to him in economic terms, although his father had a claim to half a 'goðorð'), 3) the filial rivalry with Bersi, always indirect and in the private sphere (which inverts the age and outlook disparity motif of other sagas),²⁷ 4) the degradation of opponents, and 5) the indirectly motivated antagonism toward Helgi Ásbjarnarson – all these lead to the assessment that despite such old-style heroic attitudes as concern for honour, fatalistic courage, impetuosity and the rare act of generosity toward inferiors, Helgi is a limited and vindictive personality, arrested at a juvenile stage. Sørensen, in a judgment of the comparable Þorgeirr of *Fóstbræðra saga*, writes of 'sterile self-assertion'.²⁸ What his personality lacks is made evident in his two 'others', his more temperate brother, Grímr, and his adversary, Helgi Ásbjarnarson. His meanness and

begrudging of the success of others are in contrast to the saga's various expressions of magnanimity, not least Bersi's. The relative wealth of evidence that invites such a conclusion takes a rather different turn toward the end of the saga in the plot to kill Hallsteinn. Hallsteinn's role in the saga has been too minor to provide the saga public with any justification for this act other than Droplaug's antipathy and desire to appropriate a share of his assets. Helgi participates in the killing of Hallsteinn because his mother wants it, and because he has been humiliated by both her and Hallsteinn who formed a union that was to his economical advantage. The saga public's lack of access to the scene of the plotters effectively cuts any positive emotional tie with Helgi and we are then left to concur with community opinion which condemned the killing.

Helgi has no hard and heroic choices in any of the situations that arise in the saga and, in the end, he is no hero. As the early metonymic had presaged, he remains his mother's son. The women of the saga, on the other hand, within the range of action that gender roles permitted, do face ethical dilemmas, although perhaps not on the heroic level of emotional intensity. When and how Helgi acts is largely determined by forces of personality, by steering effects (accepted or rejected) of other influential and more senior 'parental' figures, and by his conception, never articulated, of personal honour. Yet, on balance, this attempted psychological portrait should not obscure the fact that within saga conventions most action is external, and the impetuous Helgi at no time fails to take initiatives. Identifying Helgi as 'his mother's son' allows us to bring into relief the paradigmatic nature of the central family relationships in the saga, in which alter egos and siblings stand in contrast to mother and son.

NP	↔	P	↔	S
Þórdís		Droplaug		Gróa
Loyal wife & compassionate step-mother		Steadfast wife & mother Treacherous wife & stepmother		Independent widow, reliable kinswoman & conciliator
↑↓		↑↓		↑↓
Helgi Ásbjarnarson		Helgi Droplaugarson		Grímr Droplaugarson
Conventional co-chieftain		Intemperate (multiple roles)		Temperate Avenger
Mother and son protagonists (P), normative peers (NP) and siblings (S)				

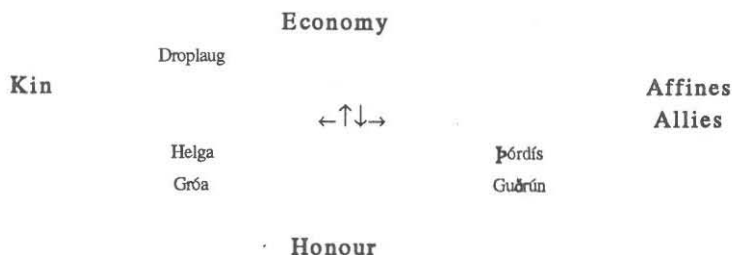
After this review of Helgi from the perspective of putative 'psychological determinants', we may now readdress the initial categories of principled women and pressured men.

*

Clearly, prominent women in the fictions of Saga Age Iceland were not immune to pressure and men were not without principle. The factors at work behind women's decisions bear directly on matters of personal honour, family standing, and economy, and the three concerns are interrelated. Given the restricted power base and field of action of these medieval women – limited largely to the interior of the household and only indirectly in contact with the legal process or armed intervention of feud – the abstract, verbal nature of female action gives an impression more of principle than of pragmatics. The largely unseen background is that of everyday household tasks.²⁹ This limitation in real and societal space often means that a woman's choice is of which man to support, for example, husband or brother, nephew or neighbour. Because of their legal disempowerment, there is a situational affinity between female heads of households and men on the run – fugitives and outlaws – for whom the female sphere could provide the essentials of food, shelter, and medical care.³⁰ In *Fljótssdæla saga* we have not only Gunnarr of the most celebrated episode, but also Helgi and Grímr after their first act of revenge, and Grímr after his near-fatal wound at Eyvindardal. Thus we have examples of a specialized extra-legal role for the nurturing female: she provides a haven for men with whose pursuers she otherwise shares a common value system. From this, the step is not great to action or directives to action that lie over the boundary of the socially licit, such as Droplaug's part in the murder of her second husband.

In this saga women are not shown in menial tasks nor as simple witnesses to male action. They are, rather, authoritative, judgmental, and directive. This characterization of women is revealed in the epithets that are chosen to reveal qualities of personality and *persona*, qualities that are not gender-specific and could be used for good or ill (English equivalents are then intentionally neutral): 'ríkilát', 'skapstór', 'steigrlát' [proud], 'ráðgjörn' [autocratic], 'fálát' [reserved], 'greypr í skapi' [determined], 'drengr', 'skorungr' [noble-minded], 'forvittr' [very wise], 'líkligr til góps forgangs' [well fitted to management], 'orlát' [liberal]. The following graphic will assist in comparing the principal and principled women of the saga. Women's choices in the sagas are as hard as men's, if not harder. They are perhaps more clear-cut, more

circumscribed but may have no less serious consequences. It should be noted that the four reference points below do not represent categorical oppositions but are poles organizing the ethical whole. Choice means valorizing one of these poles at the expense of one or more of the others. Action in any of the 'quarters', at any 'co-ordinates', could be morally defensible or indefensible – and was always practical.



Motivational orientation of the chief women of the saga

Magnanimity is a key concept here, whether it is hospitality perhaps with an ostentatious touch, intended to enhance personal repute (the early Droplaug) or of a more compassionate nature (Þórdís). It includes the female function of harbouring the fugitive. Finally, it can be broadened to encompass the self-sacrifice that Droplaug is prepared to make by entering a second marriage in order to assure her sons' economic future. But this expression of generosity of spirit is suspect to the author, since ill-founded marriages in the sagas usually end poorly and Droplaug is eventually party to her husband's death.

As a motif but perhaps not truly a theme, the matters of marriage, remarriage, widowhood and celibacy bulk large in the saga, and are a factor in the life of most characters. Personal wealth and the non-encumbrance of a second set of affinal ties seem to grant breadth of spirit and freedom of decision to Gróa and Bersi. On the other hand, the catalyst that brings the two Helgis into armed confrontation is a woman's divorce action that is backed by Helgi Droplaugarson, after having participated in his mother's husband's death. It is characteristic of *Fljótsdæla saga* that healthy and less healthy tensions within marriage are more prominent than issues of land-ownership, a conventional source of legal action and feud in earlier family sagas.

From the relations between spouses we pass to those between males, especially between patron and client. In both kinds of relationship there is an element of qualified choice in that neither marital partner nor

chieftain was imposed by the legal system. Similarly, the assumed 'inferior' in both relationships was not powerless, having considerable rhetorical resources. The world of the medieval Icelandic male was more complex than that of women, although the value system, we must conclude, was a mutually promoted one, even though women seem to have had little part in drafting it. Thus, it would be less illuminating if we were to situate Helgi Droplaugarson on the grid employed above for the women of the saga, firstly, because each of his actions has a slightly different motivation and circumstances, secondly, because of the intertwined nature of personal and political relationships. The following table classifies the chief male agents in the saga according to a taxonomy determined by the single notion of internally or externally applied pressure, coercion into action in most cases, away from action in a very few. The kinds of pressure range from the physically irresistible (here called physiological) and material (economic) to more abstract, socially compelling (honour in a variety of contexts). These are only tags for the individuals and the chief events in which they are involved, devised largely from an audience perspective. The honour of person, family and office are difficult to separate and, as in the case of the women, multiple considerations (seen in the other categories of the table) are at work in many choices. In the matter of honour, one should not over-emphasize internalized conceptions of right and wrong at the expense of public opinion and its directive influence on individual action. A key concept here is 'brigzli' [cause for reproach], the community's perception of deficient action, as when Helgi Ásbjarnarson defends himself against Helgi Droplaugarson's innuendo in the matter of relations with Hrafnkell, saying 'þat eru mér engi brigzl' (282). Later, in his new residence, he lowers his guard, saying that he had been reproached for being too cautious (a reference to inaccessibility after his wife's request to change residence?). Bersi employs the word 'grandalaust' [without intent to harm, without blame attached] to describe his relations with Helga.

Coercion	Character	Situation
Physiology	Ketill Þiðrandason	Ásbjörn's complaint, Þiðrandi's visit
Psychology		
- simplex	Þorgrímr Dungbeetle	Identifying Þórir's female match
- complex	Helgi Droplaugarson	Relations with Droplaug, Bersi, Helga, Helgi Ásbjarnarson and others
Economy	Ásbjörn Wall-hammer	Large family, small means
Hazard	Þiðrandi Geitisson	Visit to uncle Ketill during a fit
Politics	Þorkell Eyjólfsson	Vow to avenge Ketill's death on Gunnarr
Honour		
- personal	Þorvaldr Þiðrandason Norwegians Bersi's servants	Promise to attend marriage feast Gunnarr, denied their aid, names their camp site Nanny Goat Bay Humiliation by Helgi
- family	Helgi and Grímr Nollar Gunnsteinn Grímr Droplaugarson	Slander of mother Brother Þorgrímr's death Possible injury to brother Sveinungr Death of brother Helgi
- social status	Þórir Bersi	Pursuit of Helgi over death of Þorgrímr Pursuit of Helgi over 'abduction' of Helga
- chieftainship	Þorvaldr Þiðrandason Helgi Ásbjarnarson	Declines to contest chieftainship with brother Ketill; goes abroad Rannveig's unilateral divorce of Þorgrímr Fur-Cap and other cases

Varieties of 'pressure' to which male characters are subject

Just as the women of the saga are often cast in the role of extricating men from their public action through some kind of harbouring (paying compensation, hiding a fugitive, supervising convalescence, that is, being suddenly saddled with, but also accepting, responsibility as a consequence of actions in which they did not play an active part), so the men are frequently in the situation of facing an unwilling adversary. This is the case of the client who must coerce his patron (kinsman or chieftain) into action on his behalf, and subsequently that of the patron who, through the paradoxical power of shaming by an inferior, is bullied into representing his client's interests before another property owner or leader. Most of the men listed in the table above are involved in one or more relationships of this kind. To characterize this type of scene we may employ 'fryja' [reproach, taunt] (after Sørensen, *Unmanly Man*; cf. 'brigzl', *supra*) as a complement to 'hvot' [whetting], used of scenes in which women coerce reluctant kinsmen to vengeance.

What is here called 'pressure' must not be characterized in entirely negative terms, since it represents a dynamic of the Icelandic socio-economic structure. A ready, if not always ethically defensible, rationale can be found for most of the coercive undertakings in the saga, aside from the promptings of a malicious nature. As in other family sagas, gossip is shown to be the most socially irresponsible of actions and, while often without specific objectives, is paradoxically among the most consequential.

The saga's tensions between magnanimity and meanness, between character and the contingency of random events and trivial acts with unforeseen but serious consequences, are paralleled in the stylized presence of Norway in the saga. In the latter half of the thirteenth century Iceland succumbed to increasing Norwegian encroachment in the areas of political allegiance, land-holding and ecclesiastical organization, no doubt judged preferable to the continuing domestic disruptions of the Age of the Sturlungs. Retrojection of this situation to the Saga Age takes the form of a studied ambiguity towards Norway and things Norwegian. This is illustrated in *Fljótsdæla saga* in the history of Þiðrandi Geitisson. Cited as one of the four most accomplished Icelanders of his generation, it is this figure from the second rank of the saga's main concerns who makes the trip to Norway and is well received by Earl Hákon at Hladir, in the type of scene that illustrates that only a Norwegian ruler could recognize the true worth of an Icelander. But

despite the conventional invitation to stay at court, Þiðrandi feels a compulsion to return to Iceland. The sagaman suggests that it was to avoid the Earl's bad temper, but this is the very situation he falls into in Iceland. The grotesque circumstances started with Ásbjorn Wall-Hammer's defection (under economic pressure) from his family which then became a financial burden to Þiðrandi's clients, the Korekssons. Þiðrandi agreed to seek compensation in this matter while responding to his uncle Ketill's request to visit, Ásbjorn having taken service with Ketill. Then follow Gunnsteinn's cast of a blunt spear at the surly workman, Ásbjorn's complaint to the already enraged Ketill, Þiðrandi killing his uncle Ketill in self-defence and then dying from the shot of Norwegian Gunnarr. Þiðrandi's grandfather and namesake had been fatally injured in comparable circumstances – the wrong place at the wrong time – when he entered the rams' pen while the ewes were in heat. Þiðrandi is also accorded the 'moral voice' in the saga when he tries to dissuade Gunnsteinn from making the malicious spearcast and later recalls it as an unnecessary and unfortunate deed that cannot be undone. Returning to things Norwegian, the admiration that Gunnarr stimulates in his flight from vengeance re-establishes balance in this situation of antipathy and sympathy towards Norway. In the sagas, weapons and gifts of Norwegian provenance often have disastrous effects in Iceland, either because they do not measure up to demanding circumstances there or because of base emotions such as envy that they stimulate. The career of Snorri Sturluson, relevant in the present context only as a historically attested example, illustrates the combined attraction and threat of the Norwegian parent culture. A last note on saga irony in the episode: Gunnsteinn, who precipitated the deaths of Ketill and Þiðrandi, is the only survivor of the clash on the one side, Gunnarr, its late-come participant, the only one on the other.

*

To conclude, the categories in this study's title, women: men, principle: pressure, initially established for heuristic purposes, now bear re-examination, and a justification for the presumption of authorial nostalgia must be presented. The narrative flow of family-saga style brings cresting external events into high profile, while the quieter ongoing workings of the personality, for example, in marital incompatibility, unassuaged thirst for revenge, envy, are passed over with a typical statement that all was quiet for a time. But this is not truly dead time. Nonetheless, this narrative strategy and the largely reactive power ascribed to women according to the fictionalized conventions of

Saga Age society result in the impression that the women in *Fljótsdæla saga* react from within fairly discrete *situations*, while the men are involved in ongoing *relationships*. But this, in my judgment, would be a misapprehension, less perhaps in the matter of reaction than in that of compartmentalized events. It will be noted that with the exceptions of Bersi's protégée Helga and Helgi's shadowy confidante or mistress, the women of the saga are female heads of households: Droplaug and Gróa fully in charge of their farms, Þórdís and Guðrún bearing administrative responsibility for the indoor dimension of these estates, which comprised rather larger communities, in numerical terms, than might be guessed from the sagas' spare references to children, servants, the elderly, etc. These responsibilities entailed a considerable degree of empowerment, whatever limitations existed in the larger legal sphere. Personal honour would have been a consideration for these women because it was a dimension of self-image in which they could indulge, but also one which they had to manage. In medieval Iceland one's honour inevitably had repercussions on social standing and in the longer run on political support (given, received), and thus on the socio-economical security of the marital, familial and agricultural units. At the same time, the threat of either spouse to dissolve a marriage, to which both might have brought considerable resources, could have the most serious economical consequences.

The saga offers numerous examples of the relatively powerless shaming those more empowered into action. One example is Droplaug, in the conventional scene of incitation compelling her sons to an armed action that could not be undertaken by a woman. The other examples are of men pressuring other men into representing their interests. But the other women, Gróa, Þórdís, Guðrún, are permitted to occupy the moral 'high ground' in the saga. These three do not find it necessary to shame men into action; they negotiate compromise and provide compensation, or they face down their temporary adversary. Despite the earlier suggested situational affinity between women and male fugitives, the principled stand that these women take is fully consistent with the value system within which men act. This commonality supersedes distinctions in gender roles, without erasing them. We do not find women contending with women. Other saga narratives may offer examples of women as proxies, undertaking male action in the absence of males sufficient to the circumstances, but in *Fljótsdæla saga* women have a sufficient power base in their household to be fully effective, albeit within conventional gender limits, in the play of honour and

politics.³¹ Only the dictates of honour have a coercive effect on women, leaving in higher relief the impression of principle.

And as principle and pressure, women and men, must be subject of *rapprochement*, so too the distinctions of private and public space, psyche and social *persona* need to be collapsed to a degree. Despite the intimacy of Þórdís at the side of her brother Bjarni's bed during his visit, the most public of issues is being contested, even though neither party may wish external scrutiny of tactics. Both the honour code and the conception of personality at work in human relations that we meet in the sagas contribute to a similar exteriorization or 'publicizing'. Ethical life is lived in public. Only rarely in the sagas is there more to a character than is manifest in action or reflected in community or authorial comment. Thus a generalized conception of honour goes almost as far as the specifics of personality in accounting for Helgi Droplaugarson's actions.

Although interaction between men is still predicated on the opposition of interests rather than of personalities, *Fljótsdæla saga* is distinct among family sagas in the relative lack of emphasis on contention over land or chieftainships, or on concurrent long-term feud and political manoeuvring for economic gain. This may reflect the conditions of its late date. Narrative emphasis has moved from possession to process, as typified by the numerous scenes of wheedling clients before their patrons. In the manuscript tradition *Fljótsdæla saga* is a continuation of *Hrafnkels saga*, but the chief character, Helgi Droplaugarson, does not invite the ethical scrutiny that Hrafnkell, ancestor of Helgi Ásbjarnarson, has enjoyed in recent critical study.³² There is no stimulus to debate over justified or unjustified homicide, no question of personality realignment or moral improvement. Christian values are not apparent in the saga, other than in the emotional condemnation of Bersi's temple, the absence of the pagan supernatural among the story-telling motifs, and perhaps the eclipse of the heroic. As a consequence of this eclipse – the public's disaffection with the later Helgi – destiny and its justice or injustice are not brought to the thematic foreground.

Fljótsdæla saga has reminiscences of several other sagas on points of detail: 1) the wrongful use of another's horses as in *Hrafnkels saga*, 2) Gunnarr the archer and the Gunnarr of *Njáls saga*, 3) the concealment of Gunnarr and that of Þráinn in the same work, 4) the vengeful brother and young sons of Vésteinn in *Gísla saga*, 5) the nocturnal bedside killing and 6) woman's rejection of bribe in that work, 7) the extra-Icelandic

coda with Grímr in Norway and Þorsteinn in Byzantium in *Grettis saga*, 8) Grímr's gangrenous knee and Grettir's. But these are saga commonplaces, like the scene of women's incitation, and would come easily to a well-read author, if not already present in his immediate source, *Droplaugarsona saga*. The author's most influential reading seems to have been in the collection of family sagas preserved in *Möðruvallabók*. For two essential character types *Fóstbræðra saga* was a decisive model for our author. Helgi replicates the courage but ethical deficiency of Þorgeirr, as recently described by Sørensen ('Humour, Heroes', 403), while Grímr, like the somewhat more attractive foster-brother Þormoðr, is initially an accomplice but later an implacable avenger. But while creating in Helgi a flawed character more complex than Þorgeirr, the author of *Fljótsdæla saga* has not gone on, as did his predecessor in *Fóstbræðra saga*, to offer a critique of the family saga ethos, what Sørensen aptly calls that 'self-contained, complete, definitive' saga world (414). He writes from a greater distance.

If we are to identify a nostalgia that is specific to the late fifteenth or sixteenth-century Icelander to whom we owe this recension of the stories about the people of Fljótsdal, it is, in my judgment, in his recreation of a community in the post-settlement era in which some women could act with almost the same freedom and authority as men, and in which men, admirable or not and even if operating from a position of social inferiority, were no less active social agents in the dynamic balancing act for socio-economic advantage and enhanced honour. In summary, in the viricentric genre of the saga his women are idealized somewhat more, his men (Bersi excepted) somewhat less, than in the classic family sagas. The family saga as genre might be qualified as a male-gendered master-discourse. The code of ethical values supported by women and men is in the service of a male-authored society, even though the four forceful women of the saga appear more 'heroic' (the epithet is here gendered male) than the men.

Most of the inhabitants of sixteenth-century Iceland would qualify as what archaeologists and anthropologists call a stressed population: all but disfranchised in the matter of land ownership, caught in the harsh commercial grip of Dano-Norwegian interests, visited by disease, depreciation of natural resources, deterioration of climate and other natural catastrophes. To such a populace the contentions in late tenth-century Fljótsdal must have seemed largely abstracted confrontations on issues of personal honour and political clientship. Whether the moves and counter-moves were dictated by principle or pressure, they would

have been seen as fought with long disappeared, essentially social weapons. As 'last' of the family sagas *Fljótisdæla saga* is a considerable achievement, not only because of its composition in this depressed socio-economic milieu (although we cannot know the author's status) but also because of its fidelity to the language (Kristjánsson, 255), generic criteria and ethos of works composed some two centuries earlier.

NOTES

¹ In the view of Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, trans. Peter Foote, Reykjavík 1988, pp.254f.

² See most recently Stephen A. Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas and Ballads*, Ithaca and New York 1991.

³ The standard edition of *Fljótisdæla saga* is found in *Austfirðinga sogur*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, Íslenzk fornrit 11, Reykjavík 1950, pp.82-94. This recension of *Fljótisdæla saga* breaks off with Chapter 26 (see the discussion in 'Formáli', xcii-c). Subsequent events may be thought to have run parallel to those in the earlier, shorter *Droplaugarsona saga* (*ibid.* pp.135-80) and are also found in a recension of *Fljótisdæla saga* (otherwise derived from the ÍF edition), published in *Austfirðinga sogur*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, Íslendinga sögur 10, Reykjavík, 1946, pp.167-306, to which reference is made in the present study; this quotation from p.215. The English versions of excerpts, unless otherwise noted, are from *The Fljotsdale Saga and The Droplaugarsons*, trans. Eleanor Haworth and Jean Young, Everyman's Library, London 1990, pp.1-74, here p.1.

⁴ Significant recent studies are: Carol J. Clover, 'The Politics of Scarcity: Notes on the Sex Ratio in Early Scandinavia', *Scandinavian Studies* 60, 1988, 147-88; Roberta Frank, 'Marriage in Twelfth and Thirteenth Century Iceland', *Viator* 4, 1973, 473-84; Jenny Jochens, 'Consent in Marriage: Old Norse Law, Life and Literature', *Scandinavian Studies* 58, 1986, 142-76, and 'Old Norse Sources on Women', in *Medieval Women and the Sources of Medieval History*, ed. Joel T. Rosenthal, Athens, GA, and London 1990, pp.155-88; and Lars Lönnroth, 'Skírnismál och den fornisländska äktenskapsnormen' in *Opuscula septentrionalia: Festschrift til Ole Widding, 10.10.1977*, eds Bent Chr. Jacobsen *et al.*, Copenhagen 1977, pp.154-78.

⁵ Paul Schach, 'Foreshadowing in the Icelandic Sagas: Native and Foreign Models', in *Grenzerfahrung-Grenzüberschreibung: Studien zu den Literaturen Skandiaviens und Deutschlands. Festschrift für P.M. Mitchell*, eds Leonie Marx and Herbert Knust, Heidelberg 1989, pp.12-23.

⁶ Preferentially associated with magic are Celts, Celto-Norse, Sámi, Finns, even Amerindians; see William Sayers, 'Psychological Warfare in Vinland (*Eiríks*

saga rauða'), forthcoming in the Jaan Puhvel *festskrift*, eds Edgar C. Polomé and John Greppin, The Journal of Indo-European Studies Monograph Series, Washington; and Sayers, 'Sexual Identity, Cultural Integrity, Verbal and Other Magic in Some Episodes of *Laxdæla saga* and *Kormáks saga*', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 107, 1992, 131-55.

⁷ Overviews of socio-political dynamics and economic effects in Theodore M. Andersson and William Ian Miller, *Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland: Ljósvefninga saga and Valla-Ljóts saga*, Stanford 1989; Jesse L. Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 1988; E. Paul Durrenberger, *The Dynamics of Medieval Iceland: Political Economy & Literature*, Iowa City 1992; and William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland*, Chicago and London 1990.

⁸ W. Emmerich, *Untersuchungen zur Rolle von Intriganten und Bösewichten in einigen Íslendinga sogur*, Leipzig 1955.

⁹ On such double assessments, see Karen Swenson, *Heroes and Monsters in Verbal Combat: Genre Definition in Old Norse Literature*, Studies in Scandinavian Literature and Culture 3, Columbia, South Carolina 1991, pp.39ff.

¹⁰ Subsequent to Heller's inventory of whetting scenes (Rolf Heller, *Die literarische Darstellung der Frau in den Isländersagas*, Halle 1958), see most recently Carol J. Clover, 'Hildigunnr's Lament', in *Structure and Meaning: New Approaches to Old Norse/Icelandic Studies*, eds John Lindow, Lars Lönnroth and Gerd Wolfgang Weber, Odense 1988, pp.141-83; Jenny Jochens, 'The Female Inciters in the Kings' Sagas', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 102, 1987, 100-19, and 'The Medieval Icelandic Heroine: Fact or Fiction?', *Viator* 17, 1986, 35-50; Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, Woodbridge 1991, pp.189f.; and William Ian Miller, 'Choosing the Avenger: Some Aspects of the Bloodfeud in Medieval Iceland and England', *Law and History Review* 1, 1984, 159-204.

¹¹ Further to the above noted studies of marriage, see recent critical discussion in Carol J. Clover, 'Maiden Warriors and Other Sons', *Journal of English and German Philology* 85, 1986, 35-49, and 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women and Power in Early Northern Europe', *Speculum* 68, 1993, 363-87; Anne Heinrichs, 'Annat er vart eðli: The Type of the Prepatriarchal Woman in Old Norse Literature', in *Structure and Meaning: New Approaches to Old Norse/Icelandic Studies*, pp.110-40; Gísli Pálsson, 'Introduction: Text, Life, and Saga', in *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. Gísli Pálsson, Enfield Lock, Middlesex 1992, pp.1-25.

¹² On such negotiation, see William Ian Miller, 'Gift, Sale, Payment, Raid: Case Studies in the Negotiation and Classification of Exchange in Medieval Iceland', *Speculum* 61, 1986, 18-50.

¹³ See the well argued case in Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Guðrún Gjúkadóttir in Miðjundalr: Zur Aktualität nordischer Heldensage im Island des 13. Jahrhunderts', in *Heldensage und Heldendichtung im Germanischen*, ed. Heinrich Beck, Berlin 1988, pp.183-96.

¹⁴ General orientation on legitimate grounds for divorce in Jakob Benediktsson, 'Skilsmisse: Island', in *Kulturhistoriskt lexikon för nordisk medeltid*, 22 vols, Malmö 1956-78, vol. 15, 1970, cols 508f.

¹⁵ After the pioneering works of Bo Almqvist (*Norrön Niddiktning: Traditionshistoriska studier i versmagi*, 2 vols, Stockholm 1965), Folke Ström (*Níð, Ergi and Old Norse Moral Attitudes*, Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture, University College, London 1973, London 1974), and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (*The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, trans. Joan Turville-Petre, Odense 1983), see now Alison Finlay, 'Níð, Adultery and Feud in *Bjarnar saga hítðelakappa*', *Saga-Book for Northern Research* 23, 1991, 158-78; Kari Ellen Gade, 'Homosexuality and Rape of Males in Old Norse Law and Literature', *Scandinavian Studies* 58, 1986, 124-41; Thomas Markey, 'Nordic níðvísur: An Instance of Ritual Inversion?' *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 5, 1972, 19-33; and William Sayers, 'A Scurrilous Episode in *Landnámabók*: Tjorvi the Mocker', *Maal og Minne*, 1993, 127-48, and 'Serial Defamation in Two Medieval Tales: Icelandic *Ölkofra þáttur* and Irish *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó*', *Oral Tradition* 6, 1991, 35-57.

¹⁶ Further discussion forthcoming in William Sayers, 'Alien and Alienated as Unquiet Dead in the Sagas of the Icelanders', in *Reading Monsters / Reading Cultures*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Minneapolis.

¹⁷ *Gunnars þáttur Þiðrandabana*, in *Austfirðinga sogur*, 1950, pp.193-211.

¹⁸ The translators observe that the saga lacks an overriding sense of fate (xii).

¹⁹ Recent discussion in Finlay, *op. cit.*

²⁰ On the general topic, see most recently William Ian Miller, *Humiliation, and Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence*, Ithaca, New York 1993. On derogatory comment with an ethnic dimension, see William Sayers, 'Deployment of an Irish Loan: ON *verða at gjalti* "to go mad with terror"', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 93, 1994, 151-76.

²¹ On the still ambiguous matter of reading overt and covert emotion, see Miller, 'Emotions and the Sagas', in *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, pp.89-109, and *Humiliation*, Ch. 3.

²² On ocular distortion, see Anatoly Liberman, 'Mistaken Identity and Optical Illusion in Old Icelandic Literature', in *Überbrücken: Festschrift für Ulrich Groenke zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Knut Brynhildsvoll, Hamburg 1989, pp.99-110,

and Sayers, 'Psychological Warfare'.

²³ See the treatment of specific gifts in Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Norge og Island i *Laxdæla saga*,' in *Festskrift til Alfred Jakobsen*, eds Ragnar Hagland et al., Trondheim 1987, pp. 185-95.

²⁴ See Lars Lönnroth, 'The Noble Heathen: A Theme in the Sagas', *Scandinavian Studies* 41, 1969, 1-29.

²⁵ See Paul Schach, 'Anti-Pagan Sentiment in the Sagas of the Icelanders', *Gripla* 1, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, Reykjavík 1975, pp. 105-34.

²⁶ Even verbal violence is capped in this encounter, which the author does not develop into a typical flying scene; see Swenson, *op. cit.* and, of particular value, Ward Parks, *Verbal Duelling in Heroic Narrative: Homeric and Old English Traditions*, Princeton 1990.

²⁷ Rewarding discussion in Paul Schach, 'Some Observations on the Generation-Gap Theme in the Icelandic Sagas', in *The Epic in Medieval Society: Aesthetic and Moral Values*, ed. Harald Scholler, Tübingen 1977, pp. 361-81.

²⁸ Peter Foote's translation (407), in Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Humour, Heroes, Morality and Anatomy in *Fóstbræðra saga*', in *Twenty-Eight Papers Presented to Hans Bekker-Nielsen on the Occasion of his Sixtieth Birthday 28 April 1993*, Odense 1993, pp. 395-418.

²⁹ On women's domestic work as a conventional backdrop for male social activity and violence in the family sagas, see Jón Haukur Ingmundarson, 'Spinning Goods and Tales: Market, Subsistence and Literary Production', in *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, pp. 217-30; Jonna Louis-Jensen, 'A Good Day's Work: *Laxdæla Saga*, Ch. 49', in *Twenty-Eight Papers Presented to Hans Bekker-Nielsen*, pp. 267-81; and William Sayers, 'Women's Words and Work: Setting the Scene for Strife in Medieval Irish and Icelandic Narrative', *Mankind Quarterly* 31, 1990, 59-86.

³⁰ On the outlaw figure, see most recently Frederic Amory, 'The Medieval Icelandic Outlaw: Life-style, Saga, and Legend', in *From Sagas to Society*, pp. 189-203.

³¹ See Clover, 'Maiden Warriors', and on the claimed misogyny of, for example, *Njáls saga*, Helga Kress, 'Mandom og misogyni: Noen refleksjoner omkring kvinnesynet i *Njáls saga*', *Gardar* 10, 1979, 35-51.

³² Debate was joined in Theodore M. Andersson, 'The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Saga', *Speculum* 45, 1970, 575-93, and Hermann Pálsson, *Art and Ethics in Hrafnkel's Saga*, Copenhagen 1971, and is reviewed in Claiborne W. Thompson, 'Moral Values in the Icelandic Sagas: Recent Re-evaluations', in *The Epic in Medieval Society: Aesthetic and Moral Values*,

pp.347-60; further studies are listed in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, eds Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, *Islandica* 45, Ithaca and London 1985, pp.294-315.